

HELEN VICTORIA DUNCAN: A REASSESSMENT¹

by MANFRED CASSIRER

Mrs. Duncan's mediumship is unique—yet also typical—in many respects. She was born in Callander in 1898, and died as recently as 1956. Some living SPR members had sittings with her, and one (Mrs. K. M. Goldney) took a prominent part in her investigation.

Moreover, as the result of her trial at the Old Bailey,² our information about her seances is detailed to an unparalleled degree. In addition there is the copious evidence, such as it is, of Price's National Laboratory of Psychical Research (Price 1931) and of the London Psychical Laboratory.³ I have also been allowed to consult the files of *Psychic News*, which contain innumerable testimonials to Mrs. Duncan.

Parapsychologists will look in vain for any mention of this medium in Wolman's voluminous *Handbook* (1977), nor can I recall any other American publication familiar with her name. In fact, Mrs. Duncan's mediumship is probably unknown to modern researchers wherever located. Broad and Wade's recent exposure of fraud in science in general, which peripherally deals with our subject, makes a sweeping statement based on a conjuror's assessment of a single case:

'those who claim occult powers [i.e., mediums], have invariably followed one or two patterns . . . : either their powers 'fade' or they are exposed as tricksters'.

This is not true of Helen Duncan, whose powers did not fade. Exposures occurred, but are infrequent among enthusiastic reports by the score.

In an article on the Duncan trial (West 1946) our now President says:

'In the course of Mrs. Duncan's long defence, a host of witnesses was called to testify to the genuineness of her materialisations . . . most of the testimony was valueless from the psychical researchers' point of view, the narrators being obviously credulous and gullible'.

The writer of these lines, who incidentally elsewhere (West 1954) levelled a similar charge against one of his most eminent predecessors (Richet), concedes that some of the material that came to light was indeed 'most interesting', but fails to provide criteria by which to tell the gold (if any) from the dross.

Among those who have underwritten this mediumship are our own Council members; by contrast, it has been occasionally denounced by Spiritualists. It has been suggested that because some of the latter were unimpressed, Helen Duncan should by written off. Equally unreasonable was the general assumption at her trial that the evidence of believers must needs be discarded, even when it became evident that their conviction came from experience of sittings with the accused and that they had in fact been previously sceptical.

However, in view of the considered opinion of Dr West, who is, after all, a leading criminologist, we shall primarily concentrate on the testimony of the prosecution witnesses rather than on that of the defence. Having thus hopefully avoided excessive bias in favour of these manifestations, we shall then consider a report by a one-time Council member, and enquire whether there is any good corroborative evidence.

The first part of the present study relates to a series of sittings at Portsmouth

that culminated dramatically in a police raid, and ultimately led to the medium's imprisonment. The case against her was that the materializations produced through her agency were not the purported friends and relatives of the sitters who had paid good money for the privilege of seeing and conversing with them (however briefly), but crude impersonations by means of a white sheet. As she was searched and reclothed in special seance-garments before sittings, the question arose how the material utilized for the alleged fraud had been smuggled into the cabinet. PC Cross testified that she had tried to get rid of it by pushing it down to the floor, but serious discrepancies arose among the prosecution witnesses.

According to another police officer, Worth, Mrs. Duncan was apprehended *before* a torch was switched on, whereas his colleague, Cross, maintained that it had been put on previously. There was also disagreement with regard to the *direction* in which the 'sheet' disappeared. W. H. Salter, a solicitor, who was Hon. Secretary at the time and no friend of this medium, wrote in a letter preserved in the Archives:

'Worth and the police bungled this affair shockingly.—Worth seems to have been a rotten bad observer, and a rotten bad witness.—The police ought all to have been sacked for incompetence'. Not only was he an unsatisfactory witness. He was repeatedly caught out lying, and the only reason why the jury eventually found against the defendant must have been because a previous conviction was revealed through the incompetence of her Counsel. It still causes surprise as the evidence against her was practically uncorroborated, and a crucial witness was not even examined. It appears that there was a high-level conspiracy at the start, eked out with much dishonesty and deceit.⁴

As to the charge itself, it was quaintly couched so as to fall within the terms of an antiquated statute (Roberts 1945). Strangely, the prosecution provided evidence *in favour* of the accused. Thus Worth saw an amorphous figure that floated without actually coming right down to the floor. 'Peggy', a presumed spirit-form, jumped about freely, her feet banging the floor. She was hopping vivaciously in a lively fashion, whereas the medium was large, in bad health, and immobile. Worth pretended to have been impressed, was untruthful about his companion, and invented a telephone conversation with his mother who was not even connected to it. He first denied, and then admitted, having acted on instruction.

Another witness to testify against the accused (although himself a member of her fraternity) declared that 'Peggy' (a supposed child) had been heard to sing in a girlish kind of voice, full of vim and vigour. The medium, he was sure, showed every sign of being in trance. Having seen further manifestations, he became 'more convinced', even though his expectation had been pitched to an unreasonably high level.

A hostile key witness, William Lock, took exception to a figure largely on account of its bulk which suggested Helen Duncan's outsize physique. Suspicious as this may have appeared, it hardly explained the sequel in which it 'seemed to disappear through the ground': a 'curious illusion', as Counsel put it which, 'however it was done, seemed to occur in every case'.

Lock was also uneasy about the materialization's fat and clammy hands. It was pointed out, however, that Mrs. Duncan, although a very large and ungainly

woman, was not possessed of these particularities. William Lock's wife, Bessie, was also called and deposed that the figure had 'disappeared through the floor'; a strange admission, it may be thought, as coming from these quarters. Mrs. Lock's resurrected mother spoke in an exceptionally feeble voice, and had in actual fact died enfeebled by extreme old age. Another configuration, this time a boy, had almost black hair. Having completed its mission it drifted to the floor and was seen no more. It should be noted that this is corroborated by a defence witness whom even sceptics found it hard to dismiss (West 1946), the reference being to Nurse Rust. 'Peggy' once more, dancing and singing in front of the cabinet, made her exit in the same mysterious way.

The Crown was understandably nervous with such revelations; at any rate they were desperate enough to parade a woman whose total contribution was to summarize a boringly inconclusive conversation. They tried to make capital out of a photograph which proved to be unconnected with the case (Roberts 1945).

By contrast, another lady had observed how a little child danced and sang well outside the protective curtains of the cabinet, and Counsel once more wondered how a big, heavy, fat creature was able to impersonate, even in dim light, a slim young girl watched at close quarters. This figure was finally reduced to 'a bit of white on the floor'; a description which strangely tallies not only with the general mode of dematerialization (as recorded by *hostile* witnesses) but equally with certain accounts of spontaneous apparitions (Tyrrell 1953). When a shrouded figure was seized at the final Portsmouth séance, there was singular lack of agreement as to where the alleged cloth had vanished, and no attempt was made to search.

The writer's comprehensive project deals at some length with certain other aspects which can only be touched upon. Price's chicanery is sufficiently known from the work of Anita Gregory, while the bungling efforts of the London Spiritualist Alliance are as much a source of confusion as of enlightenment. In the National Laboratory little was observed beyond a massive display of ectoplasm, but if the vast majority of reports are to be given any credence, as many as fifteen figures would sometimes emerge from the cabinet in quick succession. It was not unusual for most of them to be recognised, the more so as they often displayed what might be considered quite amazing feats of ESP and xenoglossy. But these aspects will have to be held over for another occasion.

A parameter shared by spontaneous and 'induced' cases such as materializations is what Alan Hynek calls in a related context the Assimilation/Escalation Syndrome (Hynek 1972; cf. Cassirer 1984). Here the phenomenon observed is initially interpreted and perceived in terms of a *normal* experience, but escalates to the point where it can no longer be contained because of its bizarre elements which defy conventional habituation. This process is well illustrated in a report by the late Muriel Hankey,⁵ a one-time Council member.

At some time in the Autumn of 1949 Mrs. Hankey attended a sitting together with her daughter Denise, when a figure was hailed as a 'spirit friend'. Mrs. Hankey was, however, under no illusion that it was anything other than Helen Duncan thinly disguised. As can easily be imagined, she was all the more surprised when a later configuration turned out to be the spitting image of her own brother. It was, moreover, according to her own account independently recognized by her daughter. Now Muriel Hankey had been secretary to Hewat

McKenzie, the founder of the (now extinct) British College of Psychic Science. Her firsthand acquaintance with all forms of mediumship (including physical) was extensive, and her biography of McKenzie (Hankey 1963) deals at length and depth with its problems, but does not specifically refer to Helen Duncan.

Just as unfamiliar to most people is an unpublished account by a Scots woman, Mrs. Leah Longman, who had a similar experience and wrote a letter now preserved in the Archives.

This exceptionally valuable document can be studied to advantage in conjunction with the preceding. The writer (otherwise unknown) comes through as a sensible person, as befits an SPR member, intent on telling the unvarnished truth.

The sitting is located in Edinburgh on Wednesday, 19 January 1949, i.e. earlier on in the same year, and three years after the publication of Dr. West's article which had signally failed to arouse the curiosity of the SPR establishment. It was a private demonstration at half a guinea a head in the home of one of the sitters, of which there were altogether eight. Mrs. Longman was surprised when, arriving a little late at the house, she heard what she describes as a 'powerful masculine voice': the medium's. The latter was introduced as 'the lady who is going to speak at Gayfield Square on Sunday'. Though stoutly built, she appeared less massive than written reports had indicated, and was quite at ease, smoking and talking.

Business soon commenced at about 8 pm. Visibility was good; indeed the correspondent was struck by the brightness of the red light. The medium took her place in an alcove about three foot square which Leah Longman had previously inspected. There were thick dark curtains on either side. As soon as they were drawn the sound of loud snoring struck the ear, presently to be followed by Albert's stentorian voice, 'Albert' being her usual 'control'. There is almost total unanimity that this controversial entity always affected a kind of Oxford accent, whereas Helen Duncan spoke broad Scots; the *timbre* of both voices, however, seemed similar to our informant.

The first materialization was for her: a doctor who had suddenly died of a stroke middle-aged; or, at least, such details as were given (and they were vague enough) could be conscientiously applied to him at a pinch. The good lady accordingly arose and made for the alcove in front of her. The curtain parted slowly and a figure in long white drapes steadily advanced towards her. Peering into its face at only a foot's distance she failed to detect the slightest resemblance to the alleged communicator who, in every respect looked like the medium. As the illumination was good, she could see quite clearly. Her immediate reaction was one of utter revulsion and disgust at so blatant an imposture. Told to address the 'spirit', she just managed to control herself and, feigning recognition, said, 'How are you, my dear?'; to which it replied in a masculine tone, 'Oh, I'm alright'; receded, seemingly doubled up, and shrank into the safety of the cabinet.

It was noted that the curtains always conveniently closed just when the forms disappeared, and there was no suggestion in these cases of any sinking through the floor.

Mrs. Longman was by now in a rather belligerent mood such as is said to inhibit the phenomena altogether. Having become thoroughly sceptical of the

performance so far, she decided to take an even closer look at subsequent developments. So determined, she approached the figures to within a foot on the pretext of trying to encourage them to communicate. She was in for a rude shock: not *one* of them was in the least like Mrs. Duncan.⁶ We are therefore face to face with another remarkable but typical instance of assimilation and ensuing escalation such as habitually causes consternation to naive sitters. Our informant continues,

'I naturally expected every form to bear a marked resemblance to Mrs. Duncan, but to my surprise this was decidedly not the case'. Twelve to fifteen forms materialized in turn, including a black girl, the purported 'guide' of a sitter. The 'texture' and general appearance of a 'nun' differed markedly from those of the others; her long train called to mind brocade, and the bust was draped in black. The voice was feminine and gentle with a strong suggestion of a genuinely foreign accent. Men—young and old—came forth, and were unlike her purported doctor friend. Her puzzlement need not be stressed: she had been in an extremely sceptical state of mind, and yet there was not the slightest doubt that they were 'different'. At the same time she was pleased at the amount of freedom accorded to her for her investigation, for she could thus study the faces minutely at close quarters. She heard the 'spirits' talk, sometimes volubly and emotionally with tears of joyful recognition.

This lady differed from the vast majority of selfish 'believers' who typically showed little or no concern for those configurations not specifically conjured up for their own particular benefit. This attitude had at one stage in the trial provoked this heart-felt outcry from a sympathetic Counsel;

'Not very interested? To see a little child from the other world and to listen to it recite a nursery-rhyme . . . ?' This impeccable informant was reduced to a dilemma where she could only confess;

'I have no explanation to offer. There was voluminous drapery. There were forms of every shape, and the voices which were expressive and quite unlike Mrs. Duncan's. I sat there, watching calmly and closely for an hour, getting up repeatedly and staring into the faces; and in spite of my own non-recognition of the form purporting to come for me, I was considerably impressed by what happened afterwards. There was no shuffling or untoward noises behind the curtains. The alcove was *just* big enough to take Mrs. Duncan sitting down'.

Mrs. Longman's account may be accepted in our opinion as a true, honest recollection, the more so as it does not stand on its own. Its full significance is, of course, another matter, on which one can but speculate. It was composed with commendable promptness on the morning after the event, which should preclude errors of memory. One may also be in substantial agreement with her statement that it was as 'difficult to explain the phenomena of Mrs. Duncan on normal lines as it would be to accept the forms at their face value'. Such lucidly set out evidence is hard to dismiss as either due to flawed observation or deliberate confabulation. It was still fresh in the memory when, according to her own words, she committed it to paper. Like Muriel Hankey she was caught up in a process of escalating conviction of paranormality, in sharp contrast with her conscious rejection. But unlike Mrs. Hankey she was disinclined to embrace the 'naive' spiritualistic interpretation of the data which obviously commended itself to her fellow-sitters also. Both women finally were appalled by the apparent

proof of deception by impersonation, which also figures in the case of other physical mediums.⁷

The phenomena described above inspire three disparate reactions: doubt; conviction; and fear. Doubt whether such things as materialization can be anything but delusion, illusion, or grossest deception; strong conviction of survival in conjunction with belief in the tenets of Spiritualism; and irrational rejection due to fear. Unusual proof (or suggestion) of objectivity is supplied by the fact that the sceptical attitudes of our two witnesses did not in the least inhibit the phenomena. It would also appear that people who have originally been indifferent or doubtful often turned into enthusiastic devotees like a woman who wrote a testimonial to Helen Duncan which includes this panegyric, typical of its kind:

'It was as though the gates of heaven had opened, and let me in for a short time. I cannot put into words the joy I felt'.⁸ Psychical researchers on the whole preferred timorously not to expose themselves to such emotional experiences, and even life-long Spiritualists sometimes stayed away. Of course there were also those who left with the impression that they had been defrauded. This perhaps was only to be expected on any reading of the evidence when, due to such factors as oversitting, the quality of the seances and the conditions under which they were held left much to be desired. In one or two cases deliberate fraud has been justifiably imputed, but the fault may have lain as much with the organizers as with the mediums. The suggestion is that the latter themselves, to a greater degree than the much abused critical sitters, created unfavourable conditions by, e.g., not allowing sufficient light.

The positive evidence is overwhelming in quantity, and not all of it is by any means negligible. Whether or not the configurations which appear in seances such as Helen Duncan's are what they are ostensibly claimed to be is a problem of such complexity that as yet no conclusive solution can even be imagined.

38 Christchurch Avenue
London NW6 7BW

¹ This paper was originally given as a lecture at the Oxford Conference at St Edmund Hall in 1984.

² Readers are referred to the (almost) complete transcripts in Roberts—1945.

³ Excerpts only have been published in *LIGHT* issues of 1931.

⁴ This conclusion has been reached on the basis of documents in the Archives (quoted in the writer's MS on Helen Duncan).

⁵ Based on contemporary notes of an oral account.

⁶ This statement requires some qualification. LL says that 'the first two or three men' *did* look like the medium.

⁷ Notably in the case of Palladino (Cassirer 1983), Cook (Medhurst 1972), & D'Esperance (D'Esperance 1897).

⁸ Letter in the files of *Psychic News*. (Mrs. P. Ankin of Stockport).

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